DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 121 HE 028 661

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TITLE The Professoriate's Public Relations Role: A Crucial Factor in Fostering School-University Collaboration.
PUB DATE 19 Apr 95
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *College School Cooperation; Educational Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Competence; Practicums; *Practicum Supervision; *Public Relations; Schools of Education; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teacher Education; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the public relations role of education Professors in regard to school-university cooperation and collaboration. It provides suggestions that have been found to be effective in fostering and maintaining school-university collaboration and in creating a climate of mutual respect among students, mentor teachers, and college instructors. The paper focuses on pre-practicum professor-school interaction, student preparation for practicums, and post-practicum professor-school interactions. It provides examples of successful techniques for working with school administrators, principals, mentor teachers, and students. It concludes that effective interpersonal strategies are important not only in establishing collaborative relationships with schools but are even more important for maintaining productive associations. (MDM)

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ED 388 121

The Professoriate's Public Relations Role: A Crucial Factor in Fostering School/University Collaboration

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of AERA, San Francisco, April 18-22, 1995.

CE 068 661

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Abstract

Since many colleges have recently established, or are in the process of establishing, school/university relationships, a discussion of the problems or potential problems inherent in such interdependent relationships could be beneficial. In addition to being a teacher, researcher and student advisor, more and more college of education professors may find themselves in the role of a public relations person. Effective interpersonal strategies are important in establishing collaborative relationships with schools and crucial for maintaining productive relationships.

In this paper the author shares some personal experiences gained over the past two years as a professor/public relations person required to work closely with school administrators and teachers. A variety of important relationships that have to be carefully fostered and maintained if the success of a teacher education program is dependent on school/university collaboration are discussed. These include instructor/mentor teacher -, instructor/clinical faculty -, instructor/administrator -, pre-service teacher/mentor teacher -, pre-service teacher/school faculty -, pre-service teacher/school children - and pre-service teacher//instructor relations. The author found that while the majority of effective strategies to maintain congenial relationships are based on the Golden Rule and some good sense, lack of attention to a variety of seemingly insignificant subjects could lead to the development of friction and misunderstanding that may hamper university/school collaborative efforts. Some of these are school etiquette, gossip, criticism, confidentiality, dress, and student/teacher/peer personality conflicts.

Introduction

It appears that changing demographics, serious concern about the quality of education, and increased nationwide emphasis on school/community partnerships are all encouraging college of education professors to pay closer attention to the social and political contexts of their work. While research and academic excellence remain a priority, public relations are becoming a crucial element in the lives of many college of education professors

as they begin to realize that it may no longer be feasible to do their work in so-called academic ivory towers. Increasing numbers of people are beginning to believe that teachers for the twentieth century cannot be effectively prepared without close cooperation between colleges of education and schools.

In fostering essential school/university collaboration the professoriate has an important role to play. As Wisniewski and Ducharme (1989) suggest, collaboration do not imply that all partners in an activity are equally fit to do all things, nor that one group has superior wisdom and experience. In a true collaborative situation it is recognized that valuable attributes reside in both the university and in the public school. To help pre-service teachers achieve competency a university/school collaborative effort is needed that capitalizes on the research and experience of the best professors in the academy as well as on the experience and expertise of the best teachers in the schools. The responsibility of establishing the ground rules for an effective collaboration rests on the shoulders of the professoriate who has to convey the message to schools that their expertise is recognized and valued.

Driven by the beliefs of Goodlad (1990a, 1990b), who argued that meaningful reform of schooling in the United States cannot be accomplished without school/university collaboration, the College of Education at the University of Wyoming made dramatic programmative changes during the past few years. A school/university partnership was formed and a new competency-based curriculum, which provided for pre-professional experiences during the freshman/sophomore years and three progressively more intense professional education stages, was designed. Alternate periods of on- campus classroom instruction and practical experiences in public schools were to ensure a thorough grounding in all competencies and compliance with all state-mandated. During the three identified professional education stages, students would be required to be in public school classrooms for increasing periods of time working closely with mentor school teachers and appointed school clinical faculty. Time periods of field experiences were initially set at four one day school visits during EDUC 2000 (the first stage); a four weeks visit during EDUC 3000; five four-day visits during the third stage and a culminating twelve week teaching residency during the last semester. Refining the program over the past two years have led to some modifications.

In implementing the new program it was found that the arranging and scheduling of school visits required a close and trusting relationship between schools and the university. That, in turn, needed a professoriate with good public relations skills. Traditionally the college of education faculty and school teachers in the field did not come into contact very often. In the new program, however, the professoriate had become dependent on the

cooperation of public school colleagues to insure quality practicum experiences to students. They literally had to work hand in hand with public school personnel to accomplish program goals and to ensure that students acquire expected competencies.

As one of the professors assigned to deliver the first two stages of the professional sequence, the author soon found out that the new task involved much more than teaching regular foundations of education courses. Since no specific training or guidance with regard to dealing with practicum school situations or relationships with teachers and administrators were provided, the majority of instructors approached their new assignments depending on intuition, good sense and good-will to see them through.

Personal experiences over the past two years clearly point to effective interpersonal relationships as a crucial factor in establishing beneficial practicum learning environments for future teachers. It is even more important considering the fact that lasting good relationships had to be maintained with schools and teachers. The success of the program depended on continued public school cooperation in accommodating practicum students on a regular basis. One social mishap or misunderstanding in a school had the potential of causing a cycle of ill feelings that could seriously jeopardize future cooperative relationships, not only with that particular school but with other schools if word spreads around. Since so many individuals were involved in the social interaction equation - students and mentor teachers, students and clinical faculty, students and administrators, students and fellow students, students and public school students, students and their local hosts, students and their professor, professor and mentor teachers, professor and administrators, and professor and clinical faculty - the combinations of social interaction patterns where misunderstanding or tactlessness can create ill feelings, were numerous.

This paper provides some suggestions that have been found to be effective in fostering and maintaining school/university collaboration and in creating a climate of mutual respect between students, mentor teachers and college instructors. Divided under the following sub headings: a) pre-practicum professor/school interaction, b) student preparation for practicum, and c) post-practicum professor/school interaction, major areas of concern will be addressed. Included are subjects such as professionalism, workplace etiquette, discretion, mentor teacher/student relationships, student/mentor teacher personality conflicts, discipline, critical analysis and constructive criticism. The suggestions offered are based on experience gained over five continued semesters working with three different student cohorts. The students visited schools on five different occasions during their EDUC 2000 semester and for four continuous weeks during the EDUC 3000 semester the following year. Student reactions in semester evaluations and reports from the cooperating schools were uniformly positive and enthusiastic.

Pre-Practicum Professor/School Interaction: Laying the Foundation for Collaboration

In this particular college of education, restructuring program provision was made for the appointment of a school clinical faculty member at each practicum site, who was to serve as a liaison between the school district and the college of education professor and practicum students. This person was responsible for student placement with mentor teachers, the provision of assistance with student housing during the practicum period, and the handling of minor problems that students may have. Major problems were to be handled by the college instructor and clinical faculty together.

To insure that a positive cooperative relationship develops right from the start, it is suggested that instructors initiate contact, as early as possible, with the school district where their students will do their practicum . A phone call or a friendly letter of introduction to the assigned clinical faculty in which appreciation is expressed for the school's willingness to accommodate a cohort of students will help to lay a firm foundation towards the establishment of a productive relationship. It is important to inquire if any additional information was needed and to provide the person with a office and home phone number at which the instructor could be reached.

All parties involved, including students, instructor, teachers and administrators, would benefit from a personal visit of the instructor to the school district two or three weeks before the arrival of the practicum students. a) Instructors will be able to alleviate possible student anxiety by sharing his/her impressions about the town, school and mentor teachers with students, b) mentor teachers will feel more at ease having met the instructor and being able to personally clarify any uncertainties that they may have had with regard to the college of education's expectations of them, and c) school administrators will be reassured of the university's serious commitment to collaboration.

In visiting the school district it is suggested that the instructor begin with a brief visit to the school district's administrative office for a personal introduction to the superintendents and to express the university's appreciation. In recognition of the school and university team effort to improve teacher education it may be a good idea to briefly share some of the specific objectives that students need to achieve while doing their practicum under the guidance of school district mentor teachers. The concept of interdependence cannot be over-emphasized. Providing a little background on the students that will be in their schools will help to reinforce the idea of partnership and mutual responsibility for the growth and development of future teachers. Leaving a business card and an invitation to call if they have any suggestions for, or problems with regard to, the students is important.

In visiting with the clinical faculty it is very important to reinforce the colleagial relationship - one of equal partners on an equal level working cooperatively to improve teacher education. At this time particulars about students and their placements could be discussed and a vote of confidence be offered with regard to the clinical faculty's handling of placements. A careful review of a written one-two page document identifying specific expectations for mentor teachers is advised even though the clinical faculty member and mentor teachers may be familiar with general expectations all teachers involved must be clear on what is expected of them with regard to student guidance and evaluation. It is suggested that expectations are clearly outlined in written form. In this document teachers mus also be alerted to specific interview questions that will be posed by students with regard to outcomes they are expected to achieve, including questions on the school's culture, climate and philosophy on assessment, curriculum, testing, discipline, and management.

The benefits of making an effort to personally meet with building principals in their offices and with mentor teachers in their classrooms far outweigh the cost in time. Taking the time to go on personal initiative to various school buildings not only shows respect to the various individuals, but it sends a message of appreciation and acknowledgement for their contributions. Sincerity, time and personal effort are inherent in effective public and interpersonal relationships. The regular - and generally accepted procedure, usually, is for all students, mentor teachers, administrator representatives and cohort professor to briefly meet and be introduced at a short reception on the day the students arrive ir the district. Good public relations requires more than regular accepted procedures.

In meeting with building principals it is courteous to express both university and personal appreciation for accommodating students, and to invite suggestions on how to improve the practicum experience. Sharing some information about the students that will be coming to the school district will emphasize the collaborative nature of the program. It is important to ask permission to go to the various classrooms and to meet the mentor teachers. From experience it was found that principals are generally so pleased with professors taking the time to do this that they would often offer to personally show the way to the first classroom. Mentor teachers are usually pleasantly surprised to find the university instructor at their door and as a rule do not mind interrupting their lessons for a few brief minutes to meet with the instructor. Personally thanking them in anticipation for their willingness to have a student in their classroom is a token of respect and recognition of their professional expertise. This early establishment of a colleagial partnership is very important in the fostering of school/university collaboration. Again, as is so often the case with good public relations, the things that are not strictly necessary or expected are often the things that count the most!

Student Preparation For Practicum

If there is one place in a collaborative program where the saying "Prevention is better than cure" is true it is in preparing students to enter the practicum experience. Having to "fix" a student's mistake, misunderstanding or unprofessional conduct is far more difficult, embarrassing and time consuming than outlining to them the "do's and dont's" beforehand. Preparing pre-service teachers for their first professional roles is no small task, since it involves detailed attention to innumerable contingencies. Most of the students have had little or no training in public relations and have never been asked to purposely place themselves in the shoes of the various role players to be found in a place called school. For the purpose of organization it may be beneficial to divide a plan of preparation under the headings of various relationships such as the mentor teacher/pre-service teacher relationship, pre-service teacher/student relationship, pre-service teacher/school teachers and administrator relationship and pre-service teacher/peer relationships.

a) Mentor Teacher/Preservice Teacher Relationship

Students need to learn that the word mentor infers caring, setting a wise example, coaching and identifying mistakes. Ideally this would be a pleasant relationship but since all people are human and human emotions affect interpersonal relationships students need to be alerted to the possibility of *personality conflicts* occurring during their practicum. Because the mentor teacher is the senior person and has ownership of the classroom students need to understand that the task of adapting to circumstances falls on them. Just advising students to keep silent, grit their teeth and try to be pleasant when the mentor teacher appears to be over critical, reluctant to relinquish control and hesitant to allow a student to lead activities and appear to dislike his/her mentee is very unproductive. A more effective strategy would be to encourage the students to put themselves in the shoes of their mentor teachers and try to determine the reasons for such actions. This technique has proven to be beneficial for both prevention and dealing with such problems if they did occur. It is important to assist students in understanding that occasionally an attractive young pre-service teacher who comes into the classroom, smiling, and somewhat over eager to assist and gain the goodwill of the children may threaten the relationship between a classroom teacher and his/her students. Undue criticism of the mentor teacher may be averted if students try to understand that some teachers may have a very strong sense of ownership of "their students and their classrooms". Taking care not to dampen pre-service teachers' enthusiasm, it behooves instructors to gently remind students also not to enter into an unfair popularity contest with their mentor teachers. "Out-dressing" the teacher could fall in the same category as being

over-friendly with classroom children. Advising students to take their "dressing cue" from their mentor teacher and to avoid extremes in all matters has proven to be a good idea. While older and more experienced mentor teachers will probably not be affected by a sudden burst of class affection and admiration for the young student teacher, a younger, less experienced mentor teacher may feel threatened. Younger mentor teachers may also feel more reluctant to relinquish periodic control to a pre-service teacher. When problems do occur students should be cautious not to partake in a negative discussion with peers or other teachers about their mentor teachers. Problems should be shared with the appointed clinical faculty or with their instructor.

Students are empowered when they have an understanding of the delicate nature of the mentor teacher/student relationship and what their specific responsibility is in fostering that relationship. *Differences* in personalities, philosophies, teaching strategies and ways of dealing with classroom management needs to be explained from that point of view. While pre-service teachers must be encouraged to learn from, and to adopt, mentor teacher methods that appear to to effective, they should be advised to view the strategies with which they disagree as inherent to different teacher personalities. Since students are required to provide written evidence of the achievement of competencies in their portfolios, it is important to alert them to the fact that student portfolios often become public documents. Care should thus be taken on how reflections on classroom practices observed are documented. While critical reflection is an important part of the learning process, documented criticisms need to be phrased in a tactful manner so as to avoid hurting the feelings of mentor teachers and embarrassing them or the school when portfolios are viewed by peers, administrators and/or board members. Identifying mentor teachers by name should be avoided and positive methods and strategies observed need to be emphasized. A reminder again that nobody is perfect, that being a teacher is a lifelong learning endeavor, and that much can be learned from mentor teachers who have had many years of experience, will help students to focus on the positive and to de-emphasize negative incidences that may occur.

In preparing students for their practicum it is beneficial to also remind them to be *pro-active*. Always waiting for the mentor teacher to suggest things that needed to be done, or activities in which the pre-service teacher can partake, does not show commitment or enthusiasm. Offering and inquiring where one can be of assistance not only make for a positive impression on the mentor teacher, but it also ensures that maximum benefit is gained from the practicum experience. Students should also not refrain from tactfully asking the mentor teacher for reasons why certain things are done in certain ways if those reasons are not obvious to the student.

The importance of *punctuality* cannot be over emphasized. In addition to the creation of a very unprofessional image tardiness could cause a great deal of inconvenience to a mentor teacher who had depended on the student being there to help supervise or conduct an activity. Students need to see themselves as part of the professional staff and accept the responsibilities inherent in a real life job. The consequences of teachers coming late to class without alerting the office need to be outlined. Procedures with regard to absences and being late should be clearly outlined to safeguard the mentor teacher/preservice teacher relationship and protect students against misunderstanding and harmful criticism of practicum supervisors. Special emphasis must be given to the legal and safety consequences with regard to unsupervised children.

b) Pre-Service Teacher/Student Relationship

It is a very natural desire on the part of pre-service and other teachers to be liked by their students. For many pre-service teachers it is one of the most important aspects of their practicum to know that "their students" appreciated them and would miss them when they left. It is often a tremendous reinforcement for their decision to become a teacher. Most pre-service teachers have some concept of what professional behavior means, but it is helpful to reiterate the need for keeping some distance from students and to avoid gossiping with them. A brief discussion on the need to maintain a friendly but professional relationship with the children in your classroom is necessary. Preservice teachers much also be advised about the risk involved in touching students. While it is common practice in the lower elementary grades to take students by hand, or even have little ones sit on a teacher's lap, it may be wise to caution pre-service teacher about touching students in middle and high school practicum situations. It is also advisable for them to restrict interactions with children to official school hours and school activities. Inviting or allowing children to visit the student teacher at "home" - in this case at a motel or host's home - could create numerous unforeseen problems.

Appropriate dress could be classified under pre-service teacher/student relationship heading. Pre-service teachers need more guidance than just stating the requirement of dressing appropriately. Instructors need to draw their students' attention to children's developmental levels and the distraction that could be caused by unprofessional clothing. Expected activities in class need to be taken in consideration when dressing.

c) Pre-Service Teacher/Public School Faculty and Administrator Relationship

Professionalism is the key word to describe this relationship. Instructors should not assume that all their pre-service teachers know what this concept involves. A discussion of

Hugh Socket's chapter on accountability, trust and ethical codes of practice and a brainstorming activity on the requirements of professional behavior prior to the practicum experience may prevent potential problems. Students will benefit from a reminder of the importance of dependable interactions, appropriate dress, effective communication, working rapport, flexibility, and a demonstrated sense of motivation, purpose and enthusiasm for teaching are very helpful.

d) Pre-Service Teacher/Peer Relationships

Experience has shown that student peer relationships cannot be ignored by instructors who are teaching and supervising practicum cohorts. While learning in regular classes may not be hampered much by student personality conflicts it could be quite detrimental to the practicum experience of a group of students working in the same school district. This is especially true for students placed in the same school. The success and joy of the whole practicum experience are often based on the sense of comradeship among the pre-service teachers. Learning together, sharing both trials and tribulations, bouncing ideas off each other, serving as audiences for practice lessons, and video taping each other's lessons are tremendous boosters to the quality of the practicum experience. If possible instructors should deal with this right at the beginning of the semester. An effort should be made to find out if personality conflicts do exist. By the time most education students get to their first extended period practicum semester many of them have been in classes together and have known each other for a while.

It has been found useful to approach the subject of peer personality conflicts openly and directly. Future teachers need to understand that effective teachers are required and able to work with other teachers who have different personalities. Gossiping about each other's failures can be disastrous to the morale and image of the group. The importance of caring for each other and having empathy for the weaknesses of others can be reinforced by having the class do a variety of group activities specifically designed to get to know each other better. The cost of time spent to do this is more than offset by the increased success of the practicum experience later on.

e) Instructor/Pre-Service Teacher Relationship

Closely related to problems with student personality conflicts is the student/ instructor relationship. Again, this is a situation quite different from that in a regular class on campus. In a situation where students have to leave the campus and establish professional relationships with a variety of people, it is crucial that they have an instructor on whom they can depend and trust not to betray confidential information or conversations.

There are so many things that can go wrong in and out of their classrooms during their practicum experience that students absolutely need an experienced professional with whom they could discuss possible solutions to problems without fearing repercussions. Professional etiquette rules often prevent them from discussing problems they may have with their mentor teacher, administrator or peers with any one but their instructor. Quite often problems are based on a lack of understanding, difficulty of seeing situations from the other person's view point, immaturity or lack of experience dealing with the particular situation. Knowing that their instructor truly cares about them and that he/she is there to lend assistance and provide guidance, provides students with a safety net from which they could venture out with confidence.

Post-Practicum Professor/School Interaction

To reinforce the positive cooperative relationship that has developed over the practicum period and to insure that collaboration is maintained between the university and school communities, it is important that instructors write a final thank you note to all teachers involved in the students' practicum experience. A personalized letter is much more appreciated than a letter in memo form listing teachers' names alphabetically at the top. A letter in which some incident or activity that your (and their!) student has specifically appreciated, and/or admired, during the practicum period is another example of good public relations mentioned earlier - doing the things not strictly necessary or expected often counts the most!

In conclusion, increasing concern about the quality of education has brought the need for school/community partnerships to the foreground and encouraged colleges of education professors to pay closer attention to the social and political contexts of their work. Hand in hand with research and academic excellence, public relations are becoming a crucial element in the lives of many college of education professors. With the knowledge that teachers for the twentieth century cannot be effectively prepared without the close cooperation of schools, doing work in academic ivory towers has become obsolete.

Effective interpersonal strategies are important not only in establishing collaborative relationships with schools but are even more important for maintaining productive associations. College of education professors are responsible for the creation and maintenance of important relationships between student/instructor, instructor/mentor teacher, instructor/clinical faculty, mentor teacher, administrators, and pre-service teacher/mentor teacher. This requires not only that attention be paid to Golden Rule and

personal intuition attention, but also to a variety of seemingly insignificant factors in the school/university equation.

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